

Corps delays water flow revision for Missouri

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The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reignited a dispute over the Missouri River Thursday, announcing that after more than 10 years of study it would put off until next summer a decision on managing the river's six dams.

The delay represents a sharp departure from the corps' recent steps to change water flow and protect endangered species. And it drew immediate criticism from environmental groups and South Dakota lawmakers, including Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle.

"I think the corps is playing politics with the river and I think it's disappointing," said Daschle. "This turns the process on its head."

He predicted that the corps' indecision would land the issue in court and result in a judge deciding how to manage the Missouri.

The dispute, which has pitted states upstream of the Missouri River dams against downstream states, centers on how the corps regulates releases of water from the dams. Four of the dams are in South Dakota.

Since 1990, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has recommended that to comply with the Endangered Species Act, the corps should release more water in the spring and reduce the flow in the summer, mimicking the river's natural flow.

Fish and Wildlife Service officials say the current management has propelled two native bird species, the piping plover and least tern, and a fish, the pallid sturgeon, to the brink of extinction.

Higher flows are intended to trigger fish spawning and build sandbars, and lower flows would expose the sandbars for birds to nest.

The corps started its revision in 1990, and had planned to release a draft decision this month. Instead, it announced that it would release several alternatives, one of which is to do nothing.

The corps will accept public comments on the alternatives for six

months. The agency will hold workshops and public meetings in communities along the river from Helena, Mont., to New Orleans.

Next summer, the corps plans to issue a final decision that is based mostly on the Endangered Species Act but also considers public comments, said Paul Johnston, spokesman for the corps' northwestern division in Omaha, Neb.

"We decided it was the better way to go to issue a whole range of alternatives with the pluses and minuses, so everybody can weigh and evaluate what are the tradeoffs," Johnston said.

"There certainly were a lot of people anticipating there would be a preferred alternative at this stage, but we're going to make sure that all of these alternatives get appropriate evaluation by everyone."

The corps is also awaiting a report due in October from the National Academy of Sciences.

The Corps and the Environmental Protection Agency asked the academy to examine river management issues and help develop initiatives to aid the protected birds and fish, according to Brig. Gen. Carl Strock, northwestern division engineer for the corps.

Corps officials had said in June at a meeting in Sioux Falls that they anticipated spending more than \$1 billion to change the rivers' flow in compliance with the Endangered Species Act. At the gathering of the Missouri River Basin Association's eight states, Strock led a discussion on the river's future.

"We are in the midst of another evolution where environmental quality is taking a higher priority for the public," he said at that time.

State's in the drainage basin of the 2,500-mile river have long disputed management plans. Upstream states - the Dakotas and Montana - say that in addition to helping the endangered birds and fish, the changes proposed by Fish and Wildlife would benefit the \$90 million recreation industry.

But the downstream states of Missouri and Iowa say the changes would create spring flooding; kill their \$7 million commercial barge industry; and decrease hydropower production. States further downstream on the Mississippi River fear disruptions to

navigation.

Supporters of the Fish and Wildlife approach accused the corps of bowing to political pressure. The Bush administration, which controls the corps, has been criticized for favoring business over the environment.

Sen. Tim Johnson, D-S.D., also offered pointed criticism at the corps for its reversal.

"They (the corps) are shirking their duty and, in essence, guaranteeing a prolonged decision on updating the (management plan)," Johnson said. "They are going down the road that will put the decisions on the management of the Missouri River into the courts."

Chad Smith of the environmental group American Rivers said in a statement: "The barge industry, the agricultural lobby and their political allies have ordered 'about face' and the Army Corps has snapped to and saluted."

American Rivers named the Missouri the nation's most endangered river this year, in part because of concern about the water management plan.

Rep. John Thune, R-S.D., doesn't favor the Fish and Wildlife approach but wants to change the management plan to benefit the recreation industry and hydropower production.

"We had hoped that the Corps, with all their research, would give us their judgment on the best option," Thune said. "I'm not sure that putting it out for a public vote is the best way to decide."

However, the Senate's chief opponent to changing the Missouri's flows, Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond, R-Mo., praised the corps' announcement as "new-found flexibility" that would allow a genuine public debate.